

Home and Abroad: Poems

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ABSTRACT

Home and Abroad is a poetry collection that primarily examines photographs through narrative, ekphrasis, and poetry as a form of witness. It explores thirty photographs taken by Rose Shaw of farmhands in Northern Ireland in the late 19th and early 20th century that are archived in Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Cultra, County Down, Northern Ireland. Rose Shaw was a governess from Bath, England who worked as a nanny for the Gledstones in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland.

This collection broadens to include poetry that incorporates a personal and cultural perspective outside Rose Shaw's photographs. *Home and Abroad* examines individual narratives and how they influence each other. The poems carefully observe how personal experiences can inform a response and add meaning in a larger context.

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Home and Abroad, began as my poetic response to the photographs of Rose Shaw, a governess from England who looked after the Gledstanes' children at Fardross House in the late 1800s and early 1900s in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland (Maguire 60). Mr. Gledstane gave Shaw a camera, which she used to photograph labourers and farmlands. Specifically, the poems in *Home and Abroad* were inspired by my study of thirty photographs from the Rose Shaw collection archived at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Cultra, Co. Down, Northern Ireland. I developed a keen interest in early Irish photography when I worked at Siamsa Tíre, Ireland's National Folk Theatre and Gallery in Tralee and while studying for an MA in Irish Media Studies at the University of Limerick. I was particularly drawn to Shaw's striking photographs of women labourers posed in a dignified and aesthetic manner. While most of the photographers at the time were upper-class, Shaw stands out as unusual for the period. My poetry collection has since evolved into an examination of other photographs, personal memory, and the role of poetry as a form of witness.

My poems began as written representations of Shaw's photographs in the style of William Carlos Williams' ekphrastic work. Williams' poem "The Dance" provides a literal description of Brueghel's painting *The Kermess*. Williams names the painting, precisely depicting:

In Brueghel's great picture, The Kermess,
the dancers go round, they go round and
around, the squeal and the blare and the
tweedle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles

tipping their bellies (round as the thick-
sided glasses whose wash they impound)
their hips and their bellies off balance
to turn them. (11)

Williams' strict adherence to the image and simplicity of language can also be seen in *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems*. His style was connected to the early 20th century imagist movement. Imagism favours dependence on the image through precise language and was a break away from the popular poetics of naturalism and spiritualism, abstraction, and strict adherence to form (Perkins 333).

An instance of when I employ the poetic image according to Williams' strict description can be found in my poem "Rose Shaw is Given a Day Off." I write, "A barefoot girl in a shawl beams, / a creek of turf balanced on her hip." These details do not stray from what can be viewed in Shaw's photograph. However, by responding to each of Shaw's photographs in the same descriptive manner, my poetry became repetitive and restrictive. I initially held on to the belief that my poetry should be a literal depiction of the photograph to avoid speaking for my subjects. Deviating from the photo, I felt, could lead to misrepresentations and create inaccurate descriptions of Shaw's photos and her subjects.

However, a shift in my writing began to occur when I realised that my poetry could only ever be my interpretation of the photos; that is, my work could not be seen as a universal representation of Shaw's photographs. Gillian Rose helped me come to this realisation in *Visual Methodologies* where she suggests, "interpreting images is just that, interpretation, not the discovery of the 'truth'" (2). To further develop a better understanding of how to interpret Shaw's photographs, I read Susan Sontag's *On Photography*. Sontag suggests that the ability of

photographs to add clarity to meaning is tenuous; in fact, photographs only act to mystify reality (23). Sontag writes: “The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: ‘There is the surface. Now think—or rather feel, intuit—what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way’” (23). However, I struggled to look beyond the surface of the photo as I was concerned that if I relied too heavily on my interpretation, I would stray too far from Shaw’s intent.

I turned to other writers’ thinking on ekphrasis to expand my understanding on how my interpretation and Shaw’s photos could work simultaneously. Jane Hedley’s *In the Frame* suggests that ekphrastic poetry is “the act of speaking to, about, or for a work of visual or plastic art” (Hedley et al. 15). Therefore, it became my understanding that the role of the poet is to act as a voice for the image, to look beyond the surface of the image, to consider what might exist beyond it. (Sontag 23). I also asked myself what Hedley asks: “What do poems see, and what do they seek, in works of visual art—in paintings, sculptures, and photographs?” (Hedley et al. 15). By fixating less on the specifics of the photographs and by considering their many possible external conditions I became free to explore and expand my interpretations.

As my vision developed, I became increasingly aware that my personal interpretations of Shaw’s photos were beginning to inform the collection. I started to question Shaw’s renderings of her subjects. The barefoot labourers seemed to act in contrast with the artistic and theatrical framing of the photographs. John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* offered some assistance. Berger states, “We never look at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is constantly active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are” (9). I realised, as John Berger suggests, that my strict observation of a photograph could not be limited to one particular

response. It became clear that my ways of looking were constantly evolving and influenced by my relationship with Shaw's photographs.

To further help hone my approach, and to shape my thinking on ekphrastic writing, I studied other diverse practitioners of the form: John Keats, Jorie Graham, and Kevin Young. John Keats' well-known poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" illuminates and celebrates the object of the urn while questioning the relationship between beauty and truth. Keats exclaims:

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,

Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,

Sylvan historian, who canst thus express

A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme.... (Keats)

While an examination of the image is an important part of my poetry, I wanted to avoid romanticising Shaw's photographs, a gesture I feel is evident in Keats' poem through his direct tone and language. I was also aware that due to the artistic and theatrical staging of Shaw's photographs it would be too easy to adopt a Keatsian voice of awe for the beauty of the image. Shaw's labourers, I felt, demanded to be reckoned with in an impartial manner. I did not wish to take on Keats' style of objectification and turn Shaw's women labourers into "unravish'd bride[s] of quietness" who must be spoken for (Keats).

Contemporary poet Jorie Graham also informed my process. According to Willard Spiegelman, Graham uses ekphrasis to "examine and interrogate the mind's commerce with the visual world; instead of attempting to 'read' pictures she will turn ekphrastic occasions into opportunities for 'measuring herself against a visual stimulus'" (Hedley et al. 18). In "Two Paintings by Gustav Klimt" Graham observes:

Although what glitters

on the trees,
row after perfect row,
is merely
the injustice
of the world.... (42)

Here it is Graham's opinion that the glitter represents the injustice of the world. Graham continues to insert herself in the fourth stanza:

The dead
in their sheer
open parenthesis, what they
wouldn't give
for something to lean on
that won't
give way. I think I
would weep
for the mortal nature
of this world.... (42, 43)

Graham's way of measuring herself against Klimt's paintings relates well with John Berger's idea of looking at the relation between things and ourselves. In Graham's case the looking is between the poet and Klimt's paintings. However, Graham's appropriative gesture concerned me as I did not want my potential biases to cloud the reading of Shaw's photographs.

My apprehension for objectifying and speaking for the image led me to another contemporary poet, Kevin Young. Young's "Cadillac Moon" is a fine example of how the poet does not need to insert themselves as a narrator (51-53). Rather, Young lets the image do the speaking. By focusing on Basquiat's painting of the same title Young opens up the poem to encompass Basquiat's life and mortality. In the first two stanzas, Young notes:

Crashing

again—Basquiat

sends fenders

& letters headlong

into each other

the future. Fusion. (51)

As the narrator, Kevin Young, remains personally independent from the painting, the focus remains on the painting. However, what differs from Williams Carlos Williams' method of solely concentrating on Brueghel's paintings is that Young situates the artist (Basquiat) in the poem. Young's approach serves as a way to link the painting to Basquiat's life while not deviating from the image. By not positioning myself directly in the poem and relying on Young's style of examining the image and its relation to the artist, I was able to expand my poetry's reach. In "Rose Shaw's Darkroom" I situate Rose Shaw with her photographs. I write, "Many muggy mornings the flat mountain-tops / surface in Rose's viewfinder. Clogher Valley / reflected in an iron basin in the small room of stored silver." Here the focus remains clearly on the image while also concentrating on Shaw and her relationship with her photographs. Another way I avoided speaking for the image was to keep the focus on the photograph while building narrative in my

poems via specific details. Details such as clothing, locations, names, dates, and dialogue were specifically useful to situate the reader. It was my hope that by paying close attention to details in Shaw's photos, my poems would be more relatable and engaging to the reader. In "Rose Shaw is Given a Day Off:"

A girl dances a reel on a makeshift stage of a door.

A boy bounces his fingers over a concertina.

Labourers is worn shirts and coveralls

lay down their spades and sickles.

Over time my sole focus on Shaw's photographs began to feel limiting. My mentor, Karen Solie, encouraged me to expand my poems to include the broader world by looking at events outside the microcosm of Shaw's photographs. Reading Sontag further, I came to an understanding that photographs assist in expanding our perspective of the world even as they influence what is seen. Sontag claims that, "[Photographs] are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing. Finally, the most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads—as an anthology of images" (3). While photographs can offer a broader sense of the world, they also reduce the subject of the image to the viewer's experience and perception (3). It is this consumerist gesture to events that Sontag points out that I seek to resist in my poems (156). Photographs, as Sontag suggests, bear multiple meanings—there is the surface meaning and also the possibility of understanding outside the surface (23).

The multiple meanings of photographs and the possible consumerist gesture inherent to photography calls into question who and what gets represented and by whom. Shaw's labourers could be seen as poor, barefoot farmhands, objects of beauty, or existing somewhere in between.

While the photographer decides on what is captured, meaning is alluded to through what exists inside and outside the frame. Therefore, a careful examination of Shaw's photographs was required to see what the image might reveal or keep hidden within the frame. Also, by observing what existed outside the photograph from a historical perspective I was better able to represent the political, social, and ethical framework that existed at the time. The understanding that Shaw had agency also suggested that a poet, like a photographer, could be implicated in what they chose to represent. Thus, I began to examine early photographers, other than Rose Shaw, to look at events and subjects that I felt were underrepresented or ignored. My poem, "Class in American History, 1899" portrays a photograph by Frances Benjamin Johnston of a classroom where the teacher stands in front of his students. What remains hidden in the photo is the backdrop of racial segregation and violence, existing in complete contrast with the scene of the teacher and his students. How to subtly portray this in my poem without being overly explicit or sensational? A way in was through the teacher's gaze. I notice:

[his] gaze is trained neither at the camera,
nor at them [students], but towards Loudoun County, Virginia,
where Owen Anderson, eighteen,
on November 8, 1889 at 1 AM
was dragged from his cell
by one hundred armed men
to a freight depot and hanged on a derrick.

The realisation that something as subtle as a gaze could open up the poem came as a breakthrough and from this came the idea of the different ways in which the subjects in the photographs looked or turned away from the camera.

Another concern I had was that the stereotypes in the photographs could be replicated in my poems. For example, I was aware that John Hinde's postcards created highly idealised versions of Ireland. While Hinde's was solely a postcard business, one of the largest in the world at the time, it fed into the stereotypical image of Ireland as a magical place. This fantastical representation of Ireland existed before the invention of photography and further developed with the advent of the camera. A realistic representation of Ireland at the time would have been one of poverty, high unemployment, and migration. Given that Hinde's colourful views were not the reality, I wanted to be sure that my depictions of his postcards would not further add to romanticising Ireland. This concern carried over into my investigation of other photographs such as those of the Gap girls and the Claddagh, which I felt were similarly vulnerable to reductive tropes.

To avoid portraying stereotypical images in my poems, I decided to draw explicit attention to the stereotypes with humour and irony. In my poem "Colour Postcards, 1950s" I describe:

Hinde photographs gas mask fittings and fire guards.

Publishes the Blitz, in magazines, ablaze in colour.

Progresses to postcards of thatched cottages and two freckled

red-haired children accompanied by a donkey laden with turf.

By highlighting "typical" postcard Ireland I hoped to expose these stereotypes rather than adding to them. I also found that by juxtaposing the Blitz in colour with postcards of red-haired children and a donkey added to the absurdity.

It is also important to recognise that Shaw's renderings of her subjects were typical of pictorial scenes at the time. Other photographers such as Mary Alice Young and Mary Rosse

subscribed to the idea of aesthetically pleasing and staged photographs. This staging at times acted at odds with the reality that existed outside the frame. While it is evident that Rose Shaw's photographs have been staged, I feel Shaw's barefoot subjects maintain a dignity that was rarely seen. In the photos the intense sky and the rugged landscape envelop Shaw's smiling subjects as they work the fields with their children and farm animals by their side. It is this dignified portrayal that I felt a responsibility towards as well as a duty to depict the reality of the world that existed. In "Beyond the Big House" I portray a scene with some of Shaw's possible subjects. I tried to depict a realistic setting by imagining what life was like for the labourers in Shaw's photographs. I write, "The children churn butter, lug land. / Dusk shuffles into a damp cottage." Here I hoped that the details would portray the reality of the situation and yet by being attentive to language and image I hoped to retain some of the aesthetic qualities that are evident in Shaw's photographs.

As my understanding of the photograph's power to present multiple meanings grew and my interpretation of those meanings developed, so too did my desire to not reduce the subject of the image. Just as I had felt it necessary to situate Rose Shaw in a broader context of her world, I began to feel the need to include myself. It was also important to clearly insert myself as a narrator to illustrate that these poems are only my interpretation. By incorporating my personal experiences into my poetry, I hoped it would add further meaning to the collection.

I turned to Philip Levine for instruction on how to write personal narrative poems. I looked in particular at his poetry collection, *What Work Is*. What appealed to me was Levine's strong, emotionally driven narrative with themes of memory, personal loss, work, and family relationships. I was struck by his direct voice and quiet unassuming tone, which he maintains by

paying close attention to detail, colloquial language, and the line. This can be seen in the collection's titular poem:

We stand in the rain in a long line
waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work.
You know what work is—if you're
old enough to read this you know what
work is, although you may not do it. (*What Work Is : Poems* 18)

Here Levine shapes a personal narrative around queuing for work that evolves into a poem about his love for his brother. Family relationships are important to Levine and are an important theme in my work as can be seen in my poems “Car Boots” and “The Jungle.”

I was also drawn to Levine's technique of starting a poem without directly inserting the narrator into the narrative. In *News of the World* “My Father's, the Baltic” Levine writes: “Low and gray, the sky / sinks into the sea. / Along the strand stones ...” (10). The absence of an obvious narrator continues for fifteen lines until, “against storms I kneel / on the damp sand / to find my own face ...” (10). At first the narrator holds back directly positioning themselves in the poem. I feel Levine does this to communicate a distance in time and memory between the narrator and their grandfather. I used this technique to keep a personal distance in my poem, “Cochin Market, India 1986.” I write, “At six dreams of street markets / arrive chock full of mangoes, / papayas, and guavas.” On line eleven, the narrator makes themselves known in “Dreams unaided by Mam's / disinfectant bottles.” By keeping a distance, it is hoped that the narrator's memories are portrayed as being relatable and possibly suggesting that they could belong to anyone.

The technique of the narrator distancing themselves in my poetry further operates as a way to connect my historical and personal poems. Keeping the tone of the historical and personal poems similar through narrative distance, as well as attention to specific detail, language, and imagery, I hoped would help unify my collection. In “Photograph by J.A. Green” I state:

with steady machine gun-fire, Admiral Sir Harry Rawson’s
1,200 strong liberated statues and ivory sculptures,
since stockpiled at the British Museum,
where at thirteen I peered at bronze plaques
and photographs behind glass.

Here I position myself briefly as the narrator, which is my attempt to broaden the perspective of the poem and to reveal the poet who is doing the seeing. The narrative distance I establish in the personal poems also implies the presence of the poet-narrator even in the poems where the narrator is not explicit.

As *Home and Abroad* progressed, the act of remembering and questioning meaning, language, and history became vital to my writing process. In *Why Poetry*, Matthew Zapruder states, “life is mirrored in ... our use of language: we start forgetting the true significance of words and using them quickly, thoughtlessly, to function socially, and to stand in for certain experiences” (42). Therefore, I felt it necessary to examine the impact that language and the visual have on my understanding of both personal and public history. Through close study of seemingly benign objects, such as butter and rubber in the photographs, I attempted to excavate the web of meanings that might be overlooked.

To learn how to communicate the significance of the seemingly mundane, I turned to Tiana Clark’s *I Can’t Talk About the Trees Without the Blood* to inform my poetry. Clark’s poem

“Nashville,” in particular, begins by looking at the historical significance of hot chicken. The poem starts by examining “hot chicken on sopping white bread with green pickle / chips—sour to balance prismatic, flame-colored spice / for white people” (xiii). Clark goes from chicken misappropriated by white people to “searching the mob” for meaning (xv). By examining images and objects that may be considered benign, Clark begins an exploration into meaning and history. This examination of history was what I hoped to achieve in my poetry. In my prose poem, “Butter,” a trip to the Butter Museum in Cork leads me to question my history and Ireland’s complicity in the slave trade. I write, “Wooden caskets once brimming with butter rolled down lanes, arrived at the quay, then loaded / aboard ships bound for the West Indies slave trade—over 6,000 kilometres away.”

As my understanding of the significance of history and my relation to it grew, I turned to W.G. Sebald. His writings examine the Holocaust and post-war Germany through a blend of fiction and non-fiction combined with black and white photographs, essays, poetry, and prose. Sebald’s literature such as *Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz* are grounded in personal and public recollection that is mentioned indirectly or is absent from his text. In my poem, “Education at Hampton Institute, 1880s” I try to keep this absent and indirect style of writing. I observe:

The girls, selected from out West
by The Bureau of Indian Affairs for education,

clustered in blankets. Their long hair plaited,
their mouths curved downward
to their moccasins and the bare tiled floor.

Sebald's documentary style and objective voice also appealed to me and informed my understanding of how to position myself as a narrator. By consulting newspaper articles and by paying close attention to specific details and dates, I hoped to emulate Sebald's documentary style. This approach also seemed to complement my poems about Alice Seeley Harris, Lewis Hine, and J.A. Green—pioneers of documentary photography. Further to this, I felt that the documentary approach allowed me to sustain an impartial tone. I was also particularly taken with Sebald's *On the Natural History of Destruction*, a book of essays, which accounts the German amnesia of the Allied bombing of German cities. He describes the destruction that was left in the wake of the Allied bombings “on a scale without historical precedent” (4). Sebald questions the post-war devastation that “has been largely obliterated from the retrospective understanding of those affected ... ” (4). I began to look at this refusal to remember history and ignoring the past by looking at photographs of events and subjects that have been largely forgotten such as the Armenian Genocide and Ota Benga.

Therefore, personal and cultural memory is an important theme in my poetry and Sebald informed my process. In September 2001 Sebald spoke to Maya Jaggi about the importance of memory in literature at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London. He said, “Without memories there wouldn't be any writing: the specific weight an image or phrase needs to get across to the reader can only come from things remembered - not from yesterday but from a long time ago” (Maya 4). For this reason, the act of remembering the past in my poetry was vital to inform the reader of the present. I also felt it was important to show the relationship of public histories to my personal ones. I hoped that by connecting my history with a more public one the collection would portray a narrator that was prepared to perceive history as their own. This engagement and the

acknowledgment of the injustices of history can be seen in many of my poems “Butter,” “Hunt,” and “Rubber 1887-1906.”

While specific details and historical facts make up an important part of my poetry, I was worried that the narrative approach would take over the lyric. I used Sinéad Morrissey’s poetry as a model on how to balance narrative and lyric as well as how to examine photography through the lens of ekphrastic. Morrissey’s poetry also touches on similar themes I examine, such as ways of looking at history and personal memory through the visual—particularly photography. Through historical accounts and personnel recollection, Morrissey is able to frame poems infused with emotion around the photo. In Morrissey’s collection *Through the Square Window* her poem, “Electric Edwardians” connects early film with the act of looking and remembering. Morrissey writes:

and so they jostle, momentarily, blurred face by blurred face,
to smile or to bow, for the transmission of grace
in the space near the cinematographer

as though the camera cast out a fraught pool of light
in exchange for their imprint

and they are standing in it. (*Through the Square Window* 55)

Morrissey’s proficient command of language, image, and sound captures the subjects as if they are frozen momentarily in time, aware however briefly of their mortality. I examined other poems in *Parallax and Selected Poems* such as “Photographs of Belfast by Alexander Robert Hogg.” Morrissey observes:

He notices

the star potential
of tarnished water

for the glass-plate photograph:
how there are slate tones
and oiliness together.... (*Parallax : And Selected Poems* 144,145)

Here the ability of the photographer and the camera to capture a clear image of history seems to be questioned by the murkiness of the water. Another poem, “A Lie” offers a way into the world of the photograph that seems magical yet aware of the fragility of time and history:

And even the man
with the box and the flaming torch

who made his servants stand so still
their faces itched can't offer us what it cost

to watch the foreyard being lost
to cream and shadow the pierced sky

placed in a frame. (*Parallax : And Selected Poems* 206)

By observing Morrissey's themes of memory, loss, and history I began to get a better sense of the relationship between photography and poetry. I returned to Sontag's writing, realising that while photography offers the opportunity to record everything, its promise to do so is superficial. Sontag suggests, “having an experience becomes identical with taking a photograph of it ...”

(24). This means that every event is deemed important to record and capture (24). However, photography, as Sontag writes, “lies in the very logic of consumption itself. To consume means to burn, to use up—and, therefore, to need to be replenished” (179). Therefore, taking pictures only spurs further consumption as the more images we take, the more we feel we need. As Sontag suggests, “The possession of a camera can inspire something akin to lust, it cannot be satisfied: first, because the possibilities of photography are infinite; and, second, because the project is finally self-devouring” (179). This insatiable appetite to consume both images and the world around us exists and as such meaning and framing of photography can be arbitrary as Sontag suggests (22). However, I was beginning to realise that poetry assists where photography cannot by acting as a historical conscious—a witness. Carolyn Forché writes in the anthology, *Against Forgetting*, “Poetry of witness presents the reader with an interesting interpretative problem” (31). This problem occurs because as Forché suggests, “We are accustomed to rather easy categories: we distinguish between ‘personal’ and ‘political’ poems—the former calling to mind lyrics of love and emotional loss, the latter indicating a public partisanship that is considered divisive, even when necessary” (31). I found that by concentrating solely on the personal my poetry opened up the chance for prejudice and suggested the possibility of a narrator out of touch with reality. Not alluding to the personal, led to a lack of authority and insinuated possible complicity. Similarly, while trying to write poetry of the political nature I found my tone to be opinionated, suggesting a voice that was trying to force a perspective. However, a lack of a motive implied a culpability. Thus, in poetry of witness the terms personal and political became inadequate (31). Forché describes a third term as “the space between the state and supposedly safe havens of the personal” (31). Forché calls “this space the ‘social.’ ... a place of resistance and struggle ...” (31). In many poems, I attempt to write from within the “social,”

aiming to resist any personal preconceptions and political leanings. For example, see “Trophies, December 1890:” “Photographs of women / and children tossed into trenches / collecting like cordwood.” Here, I hoped to convey the act of remembering by being attentive to the visceral nature of the image of women and children tossed and collecting like cordwood. I strive to not be overtly political and personal through description by keeping the narrator at a distance while pointing to the historical atrocity. Poetry of witness, Forché states,

might be our only evidence that an event has occurred: it exists for us as the sole trace of an occurrence. As such there will be nothing for us to base the poem on, no independent account that will tell us whether or not we can see a given text as being ‘objectively’ true. Poem as trace, poem as evidence. (31)

George Szirtes further adds to Forché’s notion of poetry as trace. In *Fortinbras at the Fishhouses*, Szirtes discusses poetry as having a “memory trace, a kind of conscience, or awareness as conscience ...” (18). This examination of memory continued to inform my poetic response. Szirtes writes, “the best, most powerful, most worthwhile poems carry, I think, a sense of being in the world that is to a great extent formed by historical forces, one inhabited by other people, living, dead, and yet to be” (7). By focusing on the historical forces that existed inside and outside the borders of photographs, history, and memory I hoped that my poetry achieved an awareness that Szirtes and Forché discussed. My poem “Mosquitoes on The Euphrates” is a response to Armin T. Wegner’s photographs of the Armenian Genocide (1915-1917). I describe the events with “Infants injected with typhoid fever. / An entire village burnt near Mus. / Young and old covered in lime.” These specific details are a testimony to the systematic destruction of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire that has been largely forgotten. As the photographs began to

elicit a clear response in me, I questioned my particular reason for examining old photographs. I got an answer in *Camera Lucida*. Roland Barthes writes:

the life of someone whose existence has somewhat preceded our own encloses in its particularity the very tension of History, its division. History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it—and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it. (65)

I hope that by examining Rose Shaw's photographs as well as other public and personal photographs, my poetry touches on the division and tension of history that Barthes suggests. Through careful use of narrative, ekphrasis, and attention to the role of poetry as witness, I endeavoured to communicate the complex political, personal and social context of the image. It is my hope that by positioning myself as the narrator, that is, by inserting my voice in the poems, whether indirectly or directly, I established myself as someone deeply engaged with the photographs. While these poems, of course, remain representations of my "readings" of the photographs, it is my wish that by endeavouring to write poetry that occupies a personal and public memory, I achieved a collection that engages and provokes readers by laying bare the elisions of history.

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DEDICATION

For Jason

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